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Full title: What life in *favelas* can teach us about the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond:

Lessons from Dona Josefa

Short title: What life in *favelas* can teach us about the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most compelling themes in the ongoing discussions about the human costs of the COVID-19 pandemic concerns suffering and endurance. Some commentators and public figures have assigned the role of the “great leveller” (Milne, 2020) to the virus, one that exposes the wealthy and powerful to the same challenges faced by the marginalized and poor. Others have vehemently rejected this claim pointing out existential threats that are disproportionately higher for those dwelling and struggling at the edges of profoundly unjust societies (Mbembe, 2020). As the privileged have suffered boredom and disorientation in their homes, quite a different account has also emerged: domestic violence and feminicide for those trapped in abusive homes (Burgen, 2020), deportation of migrant populations and/or detention in unsanitary conditions (Beech & Hubbard, 2020), loss of work and livelihood (Human Rights Watch, 2020), and the fate of millions of forgotten populations living in conditions of chronic invisibility and deprivation perpetuated by centuries-long policies of exclusion and suppression (Roy, 2020).

One such account is the story of Dona Josefa who was born 66 years ago in the Brazilian *sertão* (hinterland, in Northeast Brazil) and who now lives in a *favela* (shanty town) at the periphery of São Paulo. This community—*Ocupação Esperança* (Occupation Hope)—is made up of people at the frontlines of the fight against socio-economic and political oppression that continues to permeate modern-day Brazil. *Ocupação Esperança* is often called a “feminist *favela*” not only due to the presence and active role of women in the community but also due to their unapologetic political engagement and struggle for social justice. The anti-capitalist ethos of their mission for social justice sharply contrasts some of the current branches of Western feminism that are wrapped in neoliberal values of individualism and personal achievement. In *favelas* like *Ocupação*

Esperança, the fight for justice emerges from the history of the *quilombos*—a collective resistance to colonial power, and an indigenous struggle for self-determination.

The life story of Dona Josefa is an amalgam of these struggles, and it invites reflection on many issues that are being accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic: rampant inequality, degradation of collective values, and a crisis of global solidarity. By observing the avalanche of responses to inconvenient revelations peddled by authority figures and experts of all kinds, we see the narrowness of imaginaries upon which we currently rely when desperately setting a path for change. Considering this predicament, we investigate a space that researchers and policy makers rarely consider as a potential site for learning—*favelas*.

In contrast to conventional prescriptions of impartiality in academic research, we interweave our reflections with those of Dona Josefa who acts as representative of one of the many disenfranchised communities that are currently confronting one of the worst crises in recent history, in one of the most inequitable countries in the world (Saraiva & Rampazo, 2020). Overall, we offer a shift from knowledge gleaned from institutional and privileged spaces in the Global North to knowledge gained by observing individual and collective struggles in *favelas* of the Global South. We contend that this overlooked space illuminates and enlightens our shared quest for a better future.

We open with an account of our encounter with a feminist *favela*, the nature of the role of domestic workers in Brazil, and a serendipitous meeting with one community member, Dona Josefa, in *Ocupação Esperança*, the main context of this study. We then relate the story of Dona Josefa, including her early childhood in Brazil, a life-altering accident, and her later experiences at *Ocupação Esperança*. Finally, we present several lessons learned through narratives shared by Dona Josefa in consort with our own reflections on how this unanticipated encounter revealed many hidden facets of the current pandemic and unexpected sources of courage and endurance.

2. AWAKENING, REMEMBERING AND ENCOUNTERING

2.1 Awakening

On August 23rd 2020, *Ocupação Esperança*—representing hundreds of families—celebrated seven years of the fight for decent living conditions at the periphery of São Paulo. This community was formed through the occupation of an abandoned plot of industrial land owned by a cosmetics firm in Osasco, located in the north-western outskirts of São Paulo. The community shelters more than 400 poor families from many regions of Brazil, though the majority are from the Northeast. Most of its inhabitants are unemployed, having previously worked and paid rent elsewhere in São Paulo. Increasing rent prices in the metropolis had propelled their search for housing in peripheral areas. After a long and difficult fight, these families are now waiting for the government to approve an indemnity and award home-ownership rights. The community did suffer a fire in 2016; however, the residents reconstructed it, demonstrating their strength and collective spirit. Alongside such signs of hope, inhabitants are conscious of the risk of expulsion, which has occurred in other favelas in Brazil even after many years of occupation. The struggle has been long and slow with both small and large victories celebrated along the way.

We learned about this community in a 2019 article of the French publication *Philosophie MAGAZINE* (see Image 1) that focused on a “feminist *favela*” and emerging movements for social justice in Latin America. Its analysis of the differences between Western and Latin American feminism prompted us to reflect on unexamined issues and incongruences in current feminist politics of the West. Eager to learn more from this unique context, we began gathering materials for a larger study and planned a visit to *Ocupação Esperança*. By coincidence, the first Gender, Work & Organization workshop in Latin America took place in São Paulo in November 2019.

This occasion provided us with an opportunity to initiate a week-long ethnographic visit to *Ocupação Esperança*.

The sympathetic story of a feminist *favela* in *Philosophie MAGAZINE* did not prepare us for the obstacles, fears, and insecurities that we confronted in our fieldwork there. Anxiety quickly overtook initial excitement: how do we find a place that does not exist on official maps, how do we enter and reside with others without fear, and how do we manage our own prejudices while engaging in open conversations? *Favelas* in Brazil are stigmatized spaces, off-limit zones where police repression and violence can break out at any moment. Before beginning the fieldwork, we examined existing ethnographic accounts of *favelas* in Brazil, gathering information about the context and about the emotional work that such a research endeavour could entail (Imas & Weston, 2012). Brazilian colleagues offered recommendations that ranged from using mosquito repellent to avoiding excessively emotional reactions. In Brazil, centuries of inequality and class division have created two parallel realities: an opulent class that rarely has had the occasion of seeing or experiencing life in less privileged parts of the city and those who inhabit such disadvantaged zones. The only point of interaction between these two realities is through domestic work offered by millions of women whose lives oscillate between the exigencies of servility and the shocking struggle for survival in the *favelas*. In spite of these interactions, the wealthier compatriots of these domestic workers typically remain oblivious to struggles inherent in the *favelas*.

Despite our initial apprehensions, our fears quickly disappeared by the end of our first day due to the warmth and openness of the community. During a *roda de conversa* (a focus group led by a community organizer) with the women of *Ocupação Esperança*, one participant summoned our attention—a delicate, smiling middle-aged woman with a colourful bandana on her head. It was

Dona Josefa (see Image 2), who reminded one of the authors of someone she loved as a child and considered a “second mother”.

2.2 Remembering

In Brazil, many people from the middle or upper classes have “second mothers”, domestic workers who take care of the children while parents work. Even though many women in prosperous Brazilian households rarely engage in professional activities, they continue to employ domestic helpers and nannies. *Empregadas domésticas* (domestic helpers) perform daily, traditional tasks of cleaning, ironing, cooking, and taking care of the children, and they typically live in the same house with the family, occupy small rooms called *quartos de empregada* (the maid’s room) during the week, and visit their own families (if they have one) during the weekend.

In a country with a population of more than 200 million, there are 6 million domestic workers and more than 92% of these are women, mostly black, with low education and from low-income families (IPEA, 2019). In 2013, legislation known as *PEC das domésticas* (Proposta de Emenda à Constituição das domésticas, or Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of domestic workers) granted further rights to this category of professionals. At the time, the only member of congress to vote against this legislation was then Deputy Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the current President of Brazil (Sorosini, 2013).

Despite slow but steady advances in legislation that protected the rights of domestic workers, privileged classes remain culturally dominant in Brazil. In the 2015 film *Que horas ela volta?* (The Second Mother), writer and director Anna Muylaert aptly portrayed the emotional subtleties and moral awkwardness that developed between an employer and a domestic helper. The movie tells the story of Val, who works for a rich Brazilian family in São Paulo. While Val is responsible for the children in the household, she also has to support her own family, sending money to pay for

the care of her own daughter, Jéssica, whom she has not seen for 10 years. Jéssica, is a smart, confident young woman, who wants to pursue university studies in São Paulo. Val asks her employer if Jéssica can share her little room until she finds her own place to stay. As soon as she shows up, Jéssica makes herself at home. She breaks all taboos of social distancing by treating the employers of her mother in an insolent manner. In the capable hands of Director Anna Muylaert, the relationship between employer and servant—an otherwise tolerated, “win-win” relationship—was skilfully subverted and scrutinized in this honest study of class, power, and servility in modern-day Brazil (Bradshaw, 2015). Like the 2018 film *Roma* (directed by Alfonso Cuarón) that portrayed the lives of domestic workers in Mexico City, this movie addressed an important question about selfless devotion and love, as part of the daily labours of caring. It also offered a glimpse into the bonds of affection that some middle-class Brazilians develop with their second mothers and the long-lasting impact that this relationship can have on their lives.

2.3 Encountering

After a long talk with the women of the community, one author—also born in Brazil—was invited by Dona Josefa for a cup of coffee at her home. She was living in a *barraco* (a shack or a precarious house) in extremely modest conditions; however, some little details of homeliness like flowers planted outside the shed revealed that the place was loved and cared for by its owner. On this first visit, the generous and open demeanour of Dona Josefa was admirable and irresistible, and the emotional bonding that ensued soon developed into a close friendship between the two. As Dona Josefa is illiterate, communication took the form of a continuous exchange of voice messages on WhatsApp, where thoughts were shared, confessions were made, songs were sung, and dreams were revealed. There was no formality nor rules to follow. These heart-felt exchanges connected two women—who were living vastly different lives—through a shared support and kindness. In

an exchange at the time of writing, Dona Josefa remarked: “I only saw you once, but I learned to love you”.¹ At that moment, the Brazilian author realized that she felt the same.

The relationship gradually evolved, and messages continued to be exchanged. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian author realized she was speaking with Dona Josefa as often as she was speaking with her own mother. The Brazilian author also began to worry about Dona Josefa. How would she be able to survive a quarantine in the *favela*? How would she be able to take the most fundamental precautionary measures—like regular hand washing—if she did not have access to running water?

The rapid rise and preoccupation with the pandemic prompted the Brazilian author to frequently ask *Zefinha* (an informal Brazilian version of name “Josefa”) how things were going in the community. Eager to offer advice and provide guidance, the author also wanted to know how Zefinha was dealing with the crisis. However, as the exchanges continued, both authors realized that it was they, rather than Dona Josefa, who had much to learn.

From these many interactions, we present a series of lessons that were not only revealed in the exchanges with Dona Josefa but also later found relevant in confronting the insecurities and anxieties of the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons are prefaced by autobiographical details of the life of Dona Josefa that illuminate the struggles of millions of Brazilian women who—though born in poverty—survived a system that diminished, exploited, and marginalized them.

¹ The English quotations of Dona Josefa are translations from Portuguese to English by the Brazilian author.

3. THE STORY OF DONA JOSEFA

Maria José was born in the Brazilian *sertão* and brought up in the Brazilian *roça* (rural area). From the age of five, she and her 10 siblings had to earn money to help the family survive.

My father used to call me Maria José. Josefa is a name I took after I came to São Paulo. You know, at that time, children were only registered when somebody either died or got married.

Eight days before her fifteenth birthday, Dona Josefa went to work in the *roça* with her brothers and sister and fell on top of a pile of wood. Their father had expected the work to proceed quickly, and the children were afraid that they would upset him if they were too slow or too cautious.

The accident gravely impacted the health of Dona Josefa and affected the functioning of her reproductive system. This led to profound psychological suffering and her first experience of social marginalization.

My period was over, my body swelled, it swelled, it swelled. Some said it was because I was pregnant, but it was nothing like that. I had never come close to.... At that time, oh my God...I had a lot of prohibitions, my parents controlled me a lot.

Dona Josefa's father did not take her to a doctor immediately after the accident. She was only able to receive medical help six months later, after a friend of her father happened to visit and commented on the seriousness of her condition. At that late date, Dona Josefa was taken to a hospital in the nearest capital—the city of João Pessoa in the state of Paraíba—and was later moved from hospital to hospital. At one point, she was not able to speak, but she still could see and hear. However, she claimed that no one really took this into account at the time.

At some point, she realized that she was hovering between life and death and that her life was of little value to anyone in the hospital.

They had already been tempted to kill me with that injection that is called the 'midnight tea' (chá da meia noite)²three Saturdays in a row.

From her accounts of this difficult time, she also revealed that she had been sexually abused by a doctor while paralyzed, further aggravating her emotional estrangement from the world.

In 1979 following these traumatic events, Dona Josefa survived, recovered, and persevered. She worked in different homes as a domestic worker and, for 14 years, in the *Pastoral da Criança* (Pastoral Care for Children), an organization for social action led by the *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil* or CNBB (National Conference of Bishops of Brazil). Founded by the Brazilian paediatrician Zilda Arns Neumann, the CNBB is considered to be one of the largest programs in the world devoted to child health and nutrition in environments plagued with high child mortality rates, poverty, and violence.

As a domestic helper, Dona Josefa endured sexual abuse, humiliation, and injustice. However, she also experienced rare acts of kindness. For example, one family helped her to obtain further medical treatment, and the landlady taught her to cook—a skill in which she takes great pride.

In 2014, Dona Josefa was living in a rented home in São Paulo. With increasing rent and housing prices and the inability to keep the job as a domestic helper due to her continuing health problems, Dona Josefa moved yet again. Having heard about *Ocupação Esperança* from a friend, she decided to join the community in February 2014. Living in a rustic *barraco* she built with the help of community members, Josefa learned about feminism, composed music, participated in art projects, and—for the first time in her life—aspired to more than simple survival.

² A commonly held belief among poor patients is that the State is more willing to kill than cure. This belief reflects their status in Brazilian necropolitics as “disposable bodies” with “ungrievable lives” (Saraiva & Rampazo, 2020).

4. LESSONS FROM DONA JOSEFA

The testimonies of Dona Josefa, and our reflections on what we learned from her courage and lucidity in extremely challenging times, revealed several lessons that had little to do with formal knowledge of how the world works and how it can be moulded to our will. Her knowledge was of an existential type—a way of being that did not seek to conquer, overcome, rebuild, or triumph. Her simple yet powerful lessons touched on themes of meaning, dignity, and fulfilment that could be found in her genuine concern for others and in a relational honesty that was void of pretence, and performances of status and hubris. She showed us that in the most precarious of circumstances and under the worst kind of uncertainty, one can build a rapport with the world through little acts of selfless engagement and dedication.

4.1 Lessons of resilience

The story of Dona Josefa is of rebirth—like the ancient Phoenix that rose from the ashes of its previous self. As a powerful spiritual totem, her story is the ultimate symbol of strength and renewal:

I won [made it] out of nowhere; I won out of ashes, my friend. I was born over and over again.

But like all the suffering I went through, I tell you: it is worth living, because you will discover more, and more, and more.

We had no running water; I had to get water from the neighbour's house. And the neighbour was the owner of the house. She was a midwife. I did not call her; I don't even know why. I left at 5 am and arrived at 2 pm [according to Dona Josefa when she was pregnant with her son].

I suffered a lot before I started living in this community. I arrived at 7 am and left at 6:30 pm. Doing the cleaning. What gave me the most encouragement was joining this community. Here I found support, with people like Irene, Maura, Gabi, Bigode.

Meet the people out there. By going to manifestations, you will become more confident of yourself and what you are capable of. Then you don't lose hope.

*Our country has a problem, my friend. The population in general does not like to hear a witness; they think it is a lie. They think that what people are doing is to be victims in this, in that. In my case, I don't want to be a victim of anything. Everything I said is true. If I were to tell you everything that happened to me until today, it would make about 10 books each of 200 pages. It's because we're not going to do write it literally, right? We can never do everything. I'll tell you something: **if I could read, I would leave a map of life - not a book, but a map** [emphasis added]*

4.2 Lessons of vitality and a virtuous life

Dona Josefa embodies the Aristotelian vision of a virtuous and meaningful life. She found the energy to compose songs, participate in political demonstrations, and attend assembly meetings in the community, all while earning her own living. At the time of writing, she took a train several times a week to work in São Paulo selling cosmetic products, keeping as profit around 15% of the selling price. Her eudemonistic (a sense of blessedness) attitude towards life—even in conditions of utter precarity (some would even say deprivation)—was a powerful lesson of vitality. It made our own increasingly “facebookable” pursuit of happiness seem acutely inauthentic. This lesson was one of life, not lifestyle. Rather than focussing on achievement, Dona Josefa celebrated big dreams—composing more music, publishing a book about her life, and building a house she would share with her son and grandson:

*Spending 5 years without seeing relatives, reserved in a corner without a visit, was not easy. It was not easy because half of those 5 years I spent isolated, from hospital to hospital. I think if it were today, at that time... (laughs) if I was at that time of the corona, I think someone had killed me and said I had coronavirus... Hahahahaha just a joke because I will tell you something, mercy... it was a lot, a lot... Today I laugh because I'm happy. I have my son; I have my grandson. **Get close to someone who is true, understand? (laughs) We have to be happy** [emphasis added].*

I like nature; I like plants. It's my hobby. I am passionate about two things: take care of plants and cooking.

*After my operation, I want to study. **I know I'm old, but I'm not dead** [emphasis added].*

I laugh at myself.

The expression “illiterate Shakespeare” was coined by the economist Eduardo Giannetti (2018), who argued that a country like Brazil is full of people who—if they had the opportunity—would have become great writers, workers, and artists. Curiously, some philosophers have argued that it was the lack of a formal, elitist education that allowed Shakespeare to create such an original and revolutionary body of work (Karnal, 2017). Dona Josefa is one such “illiterate Shakespeare”, as observed in the lyrics of her song, *Mulheres de luta*:

Mulheres de luta

*As Mulheres da comunidade Esperança
Na mente tem uma lembrança
De tudo o que começou
Com muita luta
Com muita garra
E muito amor
Mulher de luta
Mulher Coragem
Mulher de Fé
Mas é por isso que eu te apresento essas « mulher »
Ofereço esta música para todas as mulheres
Não importa a sua idade nem também quem você é.*

4.3 Lessons of kindness

The story of Zefinha points to little acts of kindness as depicted in the 1947 novel of Albert Camus, *La Peste* (The Plague)—a text that has been sought and read around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is our duty toward the dying others? What is our moral response to its inevitability? For Camus, there was no escape from frailty. Being alive always was, and will always remain, an emergency—a truly inescapable “underlying condition”. Plague or no plague, there is always some sort of danger—a susceptibility to sudden death, an event that can render life instantaneously meaningless. Recognizing the “absurdity of life” should not lead to despair but to

tragicomic redemption, a softening of the heart, a turning away from judgment, and a moralizing of kindness, quiet joy, and gratitude (de Botton, 2020). As recounted by Dona Josefa:

When he [Dona Josefa's brother] passed away, I was there. And the others who left and I was not close? Then there was Margarida, who just didn't die in my arms now in 2018, because finally her children had her hospitalized, but I went to take care of her, and I did. And I still think I did little for her, because they put her in the hospital, which I never thought about in my life, but we have to be very careful. Hospitals are no places for people to stay.

It is often good for us to stop, reflect, so as not to give too much space to sadness. I just want joy in our text. I want you to feel good writing this text.

I have a great goal to live, for myself, for my son, and for this community.

We have to look at the good side a lot more than the defects.

I like meetings where everyone can speak, can give an opinion. I don't like when you can't participate because you have some default. You are neither better nor worse than anyone.

Living with other human beings is not easy. We also have defects.

I wanted the world to be so united, of passion, of true love.

True love, I have not found. I have had no luck in my relationship with my son's father. But I love many people with passion, Irene, Gabi, my son, my grandson, and now you.

I feel sad when a person despises me. It hurts a lot. There are people who hide from me as the dog flees from the cross [o cão foge da cruz]. But at 2 am I pray for that person [emphasis added].

I have the gift of making friends easily.

I wish so much one day to meet with them. God allows this woman still lives, her name is Lourdes. [according to Dona Josefa concerning a woman who had helped her in the past].

4.4 In the cavern of privilege

In parallel with exchanges with Dona Josefa during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian author also observed her successful and privileged Brazilian friends—and became increasingly aware of a seemingly insurmountable chasm between two Brazils. Like the inhabitants of Plato's cavern

who were unwilling turn their heads and see another reality, her privileged Brazilian friends sought advice from a WhatsApp group in selecting stocks that were expected to profit during—and due to—the pandemic. And as the Brazilian author continued to follow and observe her friends, she became increasingly estranged. Other friends sent pictures of their children playing in extravagant playgrounds, where second mothers could be seen working amidst a full-scale, sanitary crisis.

In addition to these self-reflections, one example of the impact of power and privilege on the fate of the caregivers included a decision made by the mayor of Belém (in Northern Brazil) to define domestic work as “essential” work (Langlois, 2020). The potential impact of such a decision—in a society built on slavery—was further revealed in one of the first cases of a coronavirus-related death in Brazil. Upon returning from a trip to Italy, a *patroa* (employer) knew she was ill, but hid this information and refused to release the domestic helper during the pandemic. The worker soon contracted the virus and died a few days later (Saraiva & Rampazo, 2020).

On the flight back from Brazil to France, the Brazilian author listened to the song *Gente Humilde* (Humble People) sang by Chico Buarque (1970). The lyrics of Buarque spoke (and continue to speak) volumes considering what the author had observed and learned: *É gente humilde, que vontade de chorar* (It is humble people who make me wanna cry).

While our futures are unknown, we hope to meet Dona Josefa again. In her last message, she expressed the hope that we would again travel to her community before the end of 2020.

5. WHAT LIFE IN FAVELAS CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The story of Dona Josefa prompts reflections on larger social issues and potential avenues for change. In his recent work, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2020) argued that:

Os debates culturais, políticos e ideológicos do nosso tempo têm uma opacidade estranha que decorre da sua distância em relação ao quotidiano vivido pela grande maioria da população, os cidadãos comuns— «la gente de a pie», como dizem os latino-americanos [The cultural, political and ideological debates of our time have a strange opacity that stems from their distance from the daily lives of the vast majority of the common population, ordinary citizens— “la gente de a pie”, as the Latin American say]. (p. 10)

Since the 17th century, capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy have been the main modes of domination. Even though they are ubiquitous in the lives of individuals and societies, they are invisible in their essence and their relationality. Their invisibility stems from common sense understandings that are instilled through education and indoctrination. However, common sense understandings are both evident and contradictory. All human beings are equal, which affirms liberal capitalism. But regardless of natural biological differences, equality between underprivileged groups does not coincide with equality between privileged ones that are supported by state colonialism and patriarchy (de Sousa Santos, 2020).

Any quarantine—or confinement—is always discriminatory, more difficult for some social groups than for others. Further, it is an impossible goal for a vast group of caregivers, whose mission is to provide basic, life-sustaining services. De Sousa Santos (2020) investigated other groups for which quarantine was particularly difficult. These groups had a common suffering, which arose from a vulnerability that preceded and was aggravated by confinement. Such groups make up what is known as “the South”—a context that is not only a geographical space but also a political, social, and cultural space-time (de Sousa Santos, 2020). Therefore, the South is a metaphor for unfair human suffering created by capitalist exploitation, as well as racial and sexual discrimination.

De Sousa Santos (2020) argues that the time of the avant-garde intellectual is over. Intellectuals must now be attentive to the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens and understand how to position the experiences of ordinary individuals as a central point in the theorization process.

Otherwise, ordinary citizens are rendered defenceless before those who claim to understand their concerns. In many countries, these actors are fundamentalist religious and militaristic leaders, and money-obsessed apologists seeking capitalist, colonialist, and patriarchal domination.

The lessons we learned from Dona Josefa, and the feminist stance that we witnessed in her community at *Ocupação Esperança*, corroborated an urgent need for reimagining an anti-capitalist view of gender justice. In *Feminism for the 99%*, Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) took inspiration from a new wave of feminist militancy that had erupted globally with the reinvention of strikes and movements such as #NiUnaMenos, #VivasNosQueremos, and #Feminism4the99. They contrast the feminist movement of the “equal opportunity”, represented by Sheryl Sandberg and Hillary Clinton, with the organizers of *huelga feminista*, who insist on ending capitalism as it is. These are two different visions of feminism.

Arruzza et al. (2019) argues that feminism should not begin and end with the drive to have women represented in top positions in their professions. Feminism must rather focus on those at the bottom, which implies an anti-capitalist, eco-socialist, and antiracist stance—like the one we experienced in *Ocupação Esperança*. According to Arruzza et al. (2019), Sandberg and Clinton represented women who “want a world where the task of managing exploitation in the workplace is shared equally by ruling-class men and women” (p. 2). This liberal feminist vision asks ordinary people—in the name of feminism—to be grateful that women, rather than men, dismantle their unions, order drones to kill their parents, and lock their children in cages at the border. In contrast, Arruzza et al. (2019) and like authors have insist on ending capitalism in its current form: a system that generates managerial power, produces national borders, and militarizes police force.

A collective and anti-capitalist feminist stance can also be linked to recent critiques of postfeminism, a perspective which has only recently been drawn upon within organization studies.

In postfeminism, one can recognize a range of predictable cultural uniformities embodied in the discourses of individualism, merit and empowerment (Lewis, Benschop and Simpson, 2017; Sandel, 2020). For example, postfeminist discourses have emphasized and constructed women as empowered actors who are free to shape their own destiny (Gill, 2007). In this context, texts such as CEO autobiographies have reproduced silences around various dimensions of social difference in an age when social inequalities of income and social mobility are, in fact, growing (Adamson, 2017; Piketty, 2013).

Some authors critical of these currents in modern western feminism has also called attention to dualistic representations of women (i.e., North-South, polluter-victim, rich-poor). Recent socioeconomic transitions—i.e., affluence in the Global South and rising inequality in the Global North—demand the development of gender analytical frameworks that better recognize the diverse roles of women in a changing global social order that impacts their health. For example, Simon-Kumar, MacBride-Stewart, Baker, and Saxena (2018) have called for “an ‘interconnectedness perspective that focuses on the increasingly shared lived realities of women in the North and the South’” (p. 246).

Recently, Alcadipani (2020) also discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting gender dynamics and bringing gender gaps to the surface in many societies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a Brazilian police organization, Alcadipani (2020) argued that the pandemic has been surrounded by a macho discourse of war and that, in some places, domestic violence against women has been on the rise. Alcadipani (2020) concluded that macho public figures such as the current Brazilian President—who display disdain for caregivers—are now being severely questioned (i.e., among ex-supporters) and that the COVID-19 pandemic is positioning the values of care as central to our lives. Following these authors, we seek to draw

attention to the importance of promoting a more collective feminist stance, epitomized by *Ocupação Esperança*, in the matters of social organizing. This may help lead beyond the present crisis to a new society envisioned by Jeanne Burgart Goutal (2019) in her analysis of Latin American feminist movements:

The self is intrinsically relational, conceived as a fragment of a social whole. This feminism escapes the Western and individualist model of emancipation offered to women. I believe fundamentally that these activists force us to finally think of a postcolonial feminism which challenges the prevalence of a white, Western feminism, of universal pretension. (p. 46)

Finally, the lessons learned from Dona Josefa can also be linked with the concept of “ungrievable lives” offered by Butler (2020). Ungrievable lives (i.e., ones that are neither lost nor mourned) dwell in a zone of non-being, similar to the space offered by Frantz Fanon (2015)—“an extraordinary sterile and arid region” (p. 2). A life that matters breaks through learned schema, observed in the Black Lives Matter movement as presented by Butler (2020):

Lives matter in the sense that they assume physical form within the sphere of appearance; lives matter because they are to be valued equally. (p. 12)

The story of dona Josefa exemplified a life that had been considered by many as ungrievable, one that was fought for existence and dignity. Her struggles represent the harsh reality of many women in post-colonial contexts. Their stories are often similar: on the one hand, they are considered second mothers, on the other, they are used (and abused) as cheap labour, and their right for a dignified life is disregarded. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the shocking vulnerability and mortal risk of these women, not only in how they are denied economic help and social support but also in how they are deemed unworthy of care and preservation.

In these types of contexts, there are also clear demonstrations of the cruelty of the system: those who provide care often die due to the carelessness of those who benefit from their care. And this is precisely what makes grassroots feminist activism in *favelas* so relevant. It represents the struggles of caregivers, the second mothers who have been rendered invisible and treated like disposable humans for centuries. It revitalizes the fight against invisibility and marginalization. However, this fight is not the one of the heroic and muscular Marxist proletariat dreaming of building a new world at the ideological battlefields of significance. Rather, it is the fight of the delicate, smiling middle-aged women with a colourful bandana on their heads who refuse to go down in history as a ghost without a name and without a story of love and light to leave behind. We contend that this fight is no less heroic and worthy of recognition than any other struggle for a better future.

Conclusion

Meeting Dona Josefa was a decisive moment in revealing a radically different understanding of academic research and its ethos. John Rawls (1971) argued that a just society prioritizes the needs of its most disadvantaged members. In this spirit, we contend that socially relevant research provides visibility and gives voice to the powerless. Therefore, the mission of knowledge creation, and of empathetic service to the most vulnerable, go hand in hand.

We believe that life in *favelas* help us understand some of the larger social issues faced today, such as the need of a more engaging and collectively binding feminism that critiques global capitalism. As researchers, we must venture beyond our academic bubble and adopt alternative epistemologies that create space for an affective bond with others. If we wish to truthfully account for our impact and responsibility, there is no other path.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has disclosed that colonialism and patriarchy are enlivened and strengthened in moments of acute crisis. It has also shown a vast cavern of privilege created by global capitalism; suffering is real, and calls for action are only summoned once the wealthiest countries in the Global North are affected (Roy, 2020; Butler, 2020).

At the outbreak of a pandemic, racialized and sexualized bodies are always the most vulnerable—set in living conditions that are socially imposed and characterized by racial and/or sexual discrimination. Vulnerability increases as the living bodies of marginalized individuals are typically more exposed to the spread of the virus. Why? Because marginalized individuals live and work in places that healthcare never reaches, such as city slums, poor peripheries, remote villages, refugee camps, and prisons (Sassen, 2014). These same bodies also carry out tasks that involve more risk. These risks are inherent in working conditions, as well as in callous systems that deprive marginalized individuals from defending their rights and exercising self-protection.

Finally, prevention policies and containment are never universally applied in emergency situations. On the contrary, they are selectively chosen. In some cases, these policies are openly and intentionally aligned with social Darwinism—i.e., they guarantee the survival of bodies that are most valued, most appropriate, and most essential for the economy (Mbembe, 2020) while overlooking and neglecting devalued bodies (de Sousa Santos, 2020).

In our view, the current Federal Government of Brazil—as represented by the Brazilian president—assumes the perspective of social Darwinism. That is, poor bodies do not count. At the beginning of our research process to write this piece, the death toll in Brazil was over 50,000 (Jedidajah, 2020), and sadly, the country was losing a generation of indigenous leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic (Phillips, 2020a). Less than two months later—during final revisions, the

number of deaths had quickly risen to more than 100,000, in large part due to a callous and chaotic governmental response that was even criticized by the former health minister (Phillips, 2020b).

In his essay, *Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel (1985) insisted that the only way of radically opposing totalitarian structures of injustice was to mobilize the sense of responsibility that people have for the world. While Dona Josefa will probably never get a chance to read this essay, she is one of the most inspiring, living incarnations of its message:

It is of great importance that the main thing – the everyday, thankless, and never-ending struggle of human beings to live more freely, more truthfully, and in quiet dignity – never imposes any limits on itself, never be half-hearted, inconsistent, never trap itself in political tactics, speculating on the outcomes of its actions or entertaining fantasies about the future. The purity of this struggle is the best guarantee of optimum results when it comes to actual interaction with the post-totalitarian structures. (Havel, 1985, p. 6)

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Image 1. Dona Josefa (photo taken in November 27th 2019)



Image 2. Ocupação Esperança. La favela féministe [Occupation Hope. Feminist favela] (2019, July 2)





